

# The Narrow Gate



January 25, 1999

**Thrust statement:** The one who submits to the greater righteousness is on the narrow road.

**Scripture reading:** [Matthew 7:13-14](#).

## *Narrow and Wide Gates*

"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

As a young preacher boy, I cited this Scripture to uphold my narrow, sectarian attitude. I called upon these verses ([13-14](#)) to entice others to join my party—the company that I erroneously identified as the "narrow gate." For one not to be in the band that I belonged to was equivalent to being in the all-embracing road to hell. For one not to be in my circle—one-cup and non-Sunday school—then, that person was on his or her way to underworld. Why? Well, they were on the "spacious" road. This Scripture is still relied upon by many factions within the Churches of Christ to try to get people in line with the traditions of a select few. This citation of Scripture is often brought up by many well-meaning Christians to browbeat those who do not adjust into conformity to their eccentric fellowship. If one does not adhere to certain doctrinal understandings of a distinctive "interpretive community," then, that person is not in the "narrow way," according to certain segments of the Stone/Campbell Restoration Movement.

Many Christians still repeat this phrase to denounce those who do not concur with their critical views about individual communion cups, Bible study classes, instrumental music in the Sunday morning worship, solos, hand-clapping in the assembly, women translators, Bible colleges, and so on. Innumerable individuals conclude that every human being that strays from toeing the party line is on the "broad

road" that leads to death. Today, there are over two-dozen splinter groups that lay claim to the "narrow road." One assembly of believers is not willing to express fellowship with another association of unwavering saints. To one crowd, the limited way is their restricted reading of certain Scriptures. To another fellowship, the thin channel is their exposition of Holy Scripture. Therefore, this essay will analyze the "orthodox way" in the light of the whole of the Sermon on the Mount. Just what does our Lord have reference to when he mentions the "narrow way"?

## **THE NARROW ROAD VERSUS THE BROAD ROAD**

One must choose to follow the commandments of God or the commandments of men. One way is easy, the other way is hard. The boundaries are clearly distinguished. One gate leads to destruction, the other gate lead to eternal life. Revealed truths compel obedience to God's way. To enter the "narrow gate," one must leave "self" behind; on the other hand, to enter the "roomy way," there is no limit to the baggage—self-righteousness, pride, hatred, envy, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, discord, and so on. The "narrow gate" is the very opposite of these works of the flesh.

The objective of our Lord in this "Sermon on the Mount" is to bring people to an understanding of their nature, their character, and their practice of the two great commandments—love God and love one another ([Matthew 22:34-40](#)). One must realize that kingdom behavior is set forth in the beatitudes ([Matthew 5:3-12](#)). This kind of conduct is the narrow road and the narrow gate that Jesus addresses in His Sermon—not individual cups, Sunday school, solos, handclapping, instrumental music, and so on. The realm of the New Jerusalem is a dominion of light. This kingdom consists of those who allow their good works to be seen by men in order that God may be praised ([Matthew 5:14](#)).

Jesus speaks of ethical behavior that is in harmony with the will of God as that which God desires in His children. It is an inward righteousness that God is delighted in, not external righteousness. Following the beatitudes, Jesus addresses the praiseworthy performance that is pleasing to the Father and the unworthy conduct that is not acceptable to the Father. He explains that the quality of one's actions that pleases God is practice that is in harmony with the intent of God's law:

**Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven ([Matthew 5:17-20](#)).**

Paul also addresses kingdom conduct in his epistle to the Galatians. To begin with, he tells the Galatians that a certain course of action will prevent their entering the kingdom of heaven:

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God (**Galatians 5:19-21**).

These works of the flesh will prevent one from inheriting God's kingdom. This kind of behavior is not kingdom behavior. Rather, it is the "broad road" that leads to eternal damnation. This deed of achievement reminds one of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in which He calls for radical reformation in one's life style. Paul, too, is describing in these verses the actions that are illustrative of the "broad road." Following this catalogue of negative behavior, he then enumerates "good works" that are representative of the "narrow road":

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other (**Galatians 5:22-26**).

Again, Paul stresses the nature of the kingdom in **Romans 14:17-18**: "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men. The Kingdom of heaven's righteousness is not to be confused with the darkness of Satan's kingdom (the broad road). We are now, in the words of Paul, "set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness (**Romans 6:18**).

Beginning with **Matthew 5:21** and going through **Matthew 5:48**, one discovers that Jesus again sets forth the distinctive characteristics that are representative of the righteousness that is and is not pleasing to God. The "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago" (**Matthew 5:21**) stands for of the "broad road," on the other hand, "But I tell you" (**Matthew 5:22**) characterizes the "narrow road" that Jesus addresses toward the end of His Sermon (**Matthew 7:13-14**).

The "broad road" is composed of people who perform their "acts of righteousness" to be seen of men (**Matthew 6:1**); the "broad road" is about human beings who pray to be "seen by men" (**Matthew 6:5**); and the "broad road" consists of individuals who fast to "show men they are fasting" (**Matthew 6:16**). The "narrow road" embodies men and women who give to be seen by God, who pray to be seen by God, and who fast to be seen by God. The "narrow road" and "narrow gate" involves individuals who are bankrupt in spirit (**Matthew 5:3**); it includes people who mourn because of their sins (**Matthew 5:4**); it contains human beings who are meek as a result of their bankruptness and mourning (**Matthew 5:4**); it encompasses those who hunger and thirst after the righteousness that is inward—a righteousness that glorifies God (**Matthew 5:6**); it embraces one who is merciful (**Matthew 5:7**); and it encloses one who is pure in heart (**Matthew 5:8**).

This way had nothing to do with the many peripheral issues that divide so many Christians within the Stone/Campbell Restoration Movement. This "narrow way" had nothing to do with absolute perfection in knowledge; this "narrow way" had nothing to

do with the performance of "five-acts" of worship on Sunday morning. The believers in Rome, Corinth, and so on, did not possess flawlessness in their comprehension of God's written revelation; nevertheless, they were still in the "narrow way" as a result of living pure, holy lives. There were doctrinal differences within the early community of God, but, nevertheless, they were still exhorted to follow Jesus, so that with one mouth and heart they could glorify God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (**Romans 15:5**). This is what the "narrow road" and the "narrow gate" is all about—holiness in one's life (**Matthew 5:3-20**).

In our Lord's prayer (**Matthew 5:9-14**), Jesus taught His disciples to pray: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" . . . "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you" (**Matthew 5:12, 14**). This is a part of the "narrow road." As stated above, Jesus begins this Sermon by expounding upon the characteristics that must be manifest in the life of every follower of Christ. It is imperative that every man and woman be "poor in spirit" (**Matthew 5:3**), that is to say, he or she must not be self-righteous.

Following this Sermon, on another occasion, Jesus had the opportunity to illustrate this aspect of His Sermon on humility with the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (**Luke 18:9-14**). In this parable, Jesus illustrates the sanctimonious spirit of the Pharisee. This holier-than-thou kind of spirit leads to destruction—it is the "broad way." One's attitude should be like the attitude that Paul expresses in his Galatian letter: "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted" (**Galatians 6:1**).

In order to stress the true meaning of the "narrow road," it is necessary to exercise repetition in the retelling of some of the beatitudes. Once more, the second beatitude—"Blessed are those who mourn" (**Matthew 5:4**)—describes the feelings of an individual that is poverty-stricken in spirit. This person aches over his or her sins. And, as a result of his or her destitution, this brooding will display a make-up of unpretentiousness (**Matthew 5:5**). No one will pray, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get" (**Luke 18:11**)—this self-righteousness is the "broad road" that leads to destruction.

The person that is bankrupt, the person that is mourning, the person that is weak, will unremittingly long for goodness. This person will yearn for virtues that belong to God. Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (**Matthew 5:6**). This beatitude blesses not only the deed but also the dream that never comes true. Nevertheless, in spite of our failures, everyone is to strive toward faultlessness. Our Lord expresses it this way: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (**Matthew 5:48**). One must mirror God in all his or her actions.

Christians are the "salt" and "light" of the world (**Matthew 5:13-16**). The believer's morality must exceed that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law: "For I tell you," says Jesus, "that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (**Matthew 5:20**). Remember that the teachers of the law and the Pharisees' righteousness lay in externals

(to be seen by men), not inward (to be seen by God). The righteousness of the religious leaders embodies the "broad way," not the "narrow way."

As stated above, Jesus now proceeds to show His disciples that His followers must put into practice the righteousness of God. He demonstrates this kind of righteousness by giving detailed instructions concerning murder ([Matthew 5:21-26](#)), adultery ([Matthew 5:27-30](#)), divorce ([Matthew 5:31-32](#)), oaths ([Matthew 5:33-37](#)), an eye for an eye ([Matthew 5:38-42](#)), love for one's enemies ([Matthew 5:43-48](#)), giving to the needy ([Matthew 5:1-4](#)), praying ([Matthew 5:5-15](#)), fasting ([Matthew 5:16-18](#)), laying up treasures ([Matthew 5:19-24](#)), worrying ([Matthew 5:25-34](#)), and judging others ([Matthew 7:1-6](#)). In this Sermon, Jesus approaches the believer's whole disposition toward others. He lays down the kind of ethical behavior that constitutes the course of action that is representative of the "narrow way"—performance that God is pleased with.

Jesus says, in effect, that good behavior is kingdom behavior; this is the "narrow road" and the "narrow gate." Jesus now comes to exhortation and to application. He warns that it is not praise, as such, from the lips of men that will enable men and women to enter the kingdom of heaven, but practice. This Sermon is functional; it is meant to be lived. It is something that everyone is to achieve and execute. Paul throughout his epistles stresses this kind of behavior. One only has to reflect upon the writings of Paul to the Ephesians (chapters 4 and 5) to capture the essence of Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount:

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love ([4:2](#)); Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace ([4:3](#)); Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor ([4:25](#)); Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen ([4:29](#)); Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you ([4:32](#)); Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God ([5:1-2](#)); But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people ([5:3](#)); Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving ([5:4](#)); For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God ([5:5](#)).

## CONCLUSION

The Christian message is not some ideological theory, but something that is to be lived. The "narrow road" and "narrow gate" has to do with one's everyday living—our relationship to God and to one another. It is works of the Spirit versus works of the flesh. Paul, no doubt, echoed the thoughts of our Lord Jesus when he expresses himself to the Galatians: "So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature" ([Galatians 5:16](#)).